

ESL APPLICATIONS FOR HISPANIC DEAF STUDENTS

Barbara A. Gerner de García
Gallaudet University

Abstract

The needs of deaf children from linguistically diverse families are often overlooked by educators. The fastest growing ethnic group among deaf and hard of hearing students is Hispanic, who now represent over 16% of the school-age population. Many of these students, both literate and preliterate, are immigrants from Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. This article focuses on approaches used in a trilingual program with middle-school Spanish-literate students, and with elementary-aged students with limited literacy skills. There is a need for deaf education to recognize the trilingual/multicultural experience of Hispanic deaf students in order to improve educational outcomes for these students. Schools and programs for deaf students must begin to provide more special programs to meet the needs of immigrant students. Furthermore, teachers of deaf students need retraining in multicultural, bilingual and ESL theory and pedagogy in order to teach an increasingly diverse student population.

Introduction

Within deaf education, there is a growing call for bilingual education for deaf children, using American Sign Language (ASL) as the language of instruction, and teaching English as a Second Language, primarily through print, as the language for reading and writing. However, ESL theories and methodologies have not been widely applied

to the education of deaf children. ESL strategies may be used in some programs for adult deaf people, and, in some cases, for the education of immigrant deaf and hard of hearing children.

This article focuses on deaf and hard of hearing children from Spanish-speaking families. The instructional approaches described, however, would work well with other immigrant deaf and hard of hearing children. Among deaf and hard of hearing school age students, Hispanics are the fastest growing population. Population figures from the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Youth conducted by the Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies at Gallaudet University indicate that in 1992-93, Hispanic children were 15.9% of the deaf school-age population (Schildroth & Hotto, 1994). Many of these children have immigrated from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean (the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico), where education for children with special needs is very limited. Because of extremely limited educational opportunities for deaf children in Puerto Rico, many families with deaf children move to the mainland, beginning a back and forth migration, resulting in interrupted education (Cohen, 1987).

This article describes my work as a teacher in a day school for the deaf. This school served approximately 150 deaf children ages 3-22. Most of the children were in self-contained classrooms taught by teachers of the deaf. A few students were mainstreamed for selected classes in the adjacent elementary school. I developed a trilingual program for Hispanic deaf children, which ran as a pullout program. The school at that time (1988-1992) had a Hispanic population of 45-50% (the numbers fluctuated each year, in part due to the high mobility of many of the Hispanic families). Despite the growing population of Hispanic deaf children, there are only a handful of programs that systematically address the needs of trilingual (indeed multilingual), deaf children. There are very few teachers who are prepared to work with immigrant deaf children who are acquiring ASL and English in order to participate in American deaf education.

The Issues

Few schools for the deaf in Latin America use Sign Language. They continue to rely on strictly oral methods of education, teaching the

children to speak and lip-read. Sign Language is not universal, and there are Sign Languages in many countries of Latin America, such as Puerto Rican Sign Language (PRSL), Dominican Sign Language (DRSL), Mexican Sign Language and Venezuelan Sign Language, to name a few. Deaf children, particularly those from urban areas in Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, may have had contact with the Sign Language of their country. This may occur through contact with older students and Deaf adults as well as through the activities of religious and/or missionary groups working with the Deaf.

Immigrant deaf children face the task of acquiring not one new language and culture, but at least two. They must learn ASL and English more or less simultaneously and the cultures of mainstream America, and the Deaf community. Additionally, they may learn the culture which immigrants from their country have created here, which they are likely to be dealing with in their neighborhoods, such as Dominican American. Additionally, there is Hispanic Deaf culture, which is learned from older students and Hispanic Deaf adults.

Description of the Hispanic Deaf Population

There are two broad categories of Hispanic deaf and hard of hearing children requiring particular attention. Some of these children have literacy skills in Spanish. Their literacy skills may be low for their age, e.g. a twelve year old reading at a second or third grade level. However, most deaf students in the U.S. leave high school with only a third to fourth grade level of literacy (Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989). The second category of Hispanic deaf children are those with limited or no formal schooling. There is often a lack of educational facilities in the home countries of these children, particularly in rural areas. In some cases, limited schooling may mean that the child was in a generic special education class, with a teacher who did not use sign language or have training in deaf education. Sometimes they have sat in regular classrooms, learning to imitate school-like behavior, but not much more. Some of these students are teenagers entering school for the first time at the age of 17 or 18.

Students With Limited Or No Literacy

Some immigrant Hispanic children with limited schooling may only have basic alphabet and number skills. The school curriculum they had been exposed to in their home countries, in oral Spanish, without the use of signing, had been inaccessible. It may be more difficult for U.S. schools to adequately service older immigrant deaf students with limited literacy without instituting special programs. In the U.S., deaf students often spend longer in preschool in order to develop adequate expressive and receptive language skills, and therefore are seven or eight years old when they begin first grade. The eight year old immigrant student could be placed in a first grade class, and provided with additional help with language and literacy skills. But what should be done with an eleven year old or an eighteen year old who may not read, and cannot be placed with age-level peers? Older deaf students with no formal schooling often may be placed with the lowest functioning deaf students, who have additional disabilities..

When placed in classes with multiply disabled deaf children, these immigrant children have little exposure to age-appropriate peer language, desirable school behaviors, or stimulating curriculum. Their placement may be seen as justified by teachers and administrators who believe that placement in "the regular program" would be frustrating for the student. However, perhaps it is the teachers who find it frustrating, because they are unprepared to deal with the needs of immigrant deaf students.

Other immigrant deaf children enter school in this country using sign language that their American teachers (usually hearing and Anglo) don't know. They may use PRSL, or DRSL, or home signs (idiosyncratic signs created to use with friends and family), along with gestures, in an attempt to communicate in a new and unfamiliar environment. Too often, the school may label these immigrant students as having "no language", rather than as using a different language. When immigrant deaf and hard of hearing students are labeled by U.S. schools as having no language, their language differences are seen as a disability. They are not provided with appropriate educational programs that introduce them to ASL and English as new languages. Their language diversity is characterized, in the words of Ruiz (Ruiz, 1990; Ruiz & Nover, 1992),

as "language as a problem" leading to placement in special classes for deaf children with multiple disabilities.

Students With Spanish Literacy

What happens to deaf and hard of hearing children with literacy skills in Spanish? As previously stated, students with basic literacy skills in Spanish often may be reading below their age level. These immigrant students now must deal with an unfamiliar print environment (English) and must learn functional print literacy of everyday life.

There are very few teachers of the deaf who are trained in ESL methodology. If immigrant deaf students receive ESL support, it may be minimal, and from an untrained teacher. In this situation, which unfortunately dominates deaf education, immigrant students are left to learn English and ASL or, more often, Signed English (or whatever sign system the school may use) through submersion. The "sink or swim" approach to educating children (Nieto, 1992) ignores the language(s) the children already have. In the case of Hispanic deaf students, any Spanish they know is ignored, as well as the sign language they used in their native country, or use at home with their families.

These students face an additional obstacle. They may appear to pick up ASL or signs quickly, using it to interact with their peers. As often occurs in the case of children learning English, the ability to use the new language in face to face conversation does not translate into an ability to use the language for academic purposes. However their teachers may not be aware that learning to use language for academic purposes is a much longer process, taking from five to seven years or more.

Instruction in some classrooms for deaf students is "through the air with the teacher signing ASL, and using written English. In schools which do not accept the use of ASL, or in classrooms with hearing teachers who are not fluent in ASL, the instruction may be through "sign supported speech" (Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989), meaning the teacher speaks English while trying to simultaneously sign what she is saying. However, in either situation, immigrant students are depending on the input of two languages they do not know. They do not know the visual/gestural language (ASL or the sign system) or English (presented orally and/or in written form). They are unable to read their textbooks,

or homework assignments. These students, submersed in languages they do not know, may fail to progress. As a result, these immigrant deaf students remain in their placements at the lowest levels, and this is justified by their apparent inability to learn.

Whole Language Strategies' Thematic Teaching For Deaf ESL Students

The use of whole language strategies and thematic teaching with English Language Learners' classrooms is well described in many recent publications (Crawford, 1993; Peregoy & Boyle, 1993). Whole language teaching, or holistic education is an educational philosophy that cannot be implemented overnight. Rather, it is a process that requires teachers to become student-centered "kidwatchers". Whole language may in fact be more of a buzzword than a reality in many schools. For that reason, I would prefer to describe my teaching practice as progressing towards and developing holistic practice. Additionally, although the application of whole language methods and philosophy has made great inroads into bilingual and ESL programs, we have not been doing this long. This philosophy has also been applied to the education of deaf children (Perspectives, 1991), but little attention, if any has been given to the issues of developing English/ASL literacy in immigrant deaf children.

With the help of a Teacher Fellows Program in Whole Language Literacy, and Title VII training in bilingual literacy development, I began applying these strategies in my ESL and bilingual reading classes, using thematic units to organize my teaching. For my middle school students, as well as my upper elementary students, I relied heavily on the use of children's literature. Picture books appeal to all ages, and should not be limited to Pre-K to third grade students (see: Benedict & Carlisle, 1992, which discusses the use of picture books for middle and high school). I believe that teachers convey a sense of worthiness to their students when they make beautiful books available in their classrooms.

I found it very rewarding and motivating to students both at the basic literacy level and more advanced levels to work with children's literature., and to organize teaching by units. It may seem difficult (or even contradictory) to teach thematically in a 45 minute class period with students that are not with you all day, but in the end, teaching

thematically provides more continuity. I had students I saw daily, as well as students I had only two or three periods a week. Whole language strategies and thematic teaching can be extremely lucrative for all ESL teachers, including teachers of deaf and hard of hearing immigrant students who are learning ASL and English.

Sample Thematic Units

What follows is a description of two of the units of study I developed for my ESL classes. The first unit of study was used with a group of three Spanish dominant seventh and eighth grade students (two females, one male, ages 13 and 14) who were in their third year of ESL with me. Except for reading (bilingual instruction in Spanish and English) and ESL, they were students in a self-contained middle school program for deaf students. They came to me daily for 90 minutes.

Themes were inspired" by topics of study in their other classes. For example, in preparation for a class trip to see *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and study of the Holocaust period in the middle school, we read *¿Quién cuentan las estrellas? (Number the Stars)* by Lois Lowry. The theme described next, on "Rethinking Columbus" was chosen to tie in with their middle school curriculum on history of the Americas, but explore that history in a culturally relevant way in the bilingual/ESL resource room. Grant money enabled me to obtain relevant materials which had begun to flood the market in preparation for the Quincentennial.

Rethinking Columbus

The unit focused on social studies and allowed us (students and teacher) to create a learning experience that depended on and expanded critical thinking, about events 500 years ago. This provided us with an opportunity not to learn facts, but to question facts and construct a meaningful interpretation of these events with a Hispanic/Latino perspective. Our goal was to study this tumultuous time in history - the arrival of Europeans in the Americas - that led to the formation of a new race - the Latinos.

This sounds complex for middle school deaf students. Yet there is no reason this type of critical pedagogy should be reserved for hearing

students, high school students or English dominant students. An indispensable guide in the process was the student/teacher curriculum *Rethinking Columbus* (Rethinking Schools & the Network of Educators on Central America). We attempted to compare three perspectives - the European view of "the discovery," the African/Indigenous Indian view of "the invasion," the Latino/Hispanic view of "the birth of La Raza."

We created a bulletin board in the classroom representing the three perspectives and added to it as we read, discussed and explored the topic. In addition to reading and writing, discussing, and drawing, we made a videotape. Here the students as a group summarized what they had learned - the greed for gold and land that motivated the explorers/conquerors; the destruction of Arawak/Taino culture; the beginnings of the Puerto Rican "race" through intermingling of Spanish, indigenous and African peoples. Their conclusion was that neither the Indigenous peoples (Indians) nor people of African origin had much to celebrate related to the Quincentennial. Rather, the "Encounter" resulted in the destruction of the Taino people and culture and the enslavement of Africans.

We explored the European view by reading the book *The Boy Who Sailed with Columbus* (Foreman, 1991). This story which focuses on an orphaned Viking boy named Leif; portrays the boy's capture by Taino Indians, and his adoption of Indian language and customs. At the book's end, he has made his way far north with his adopted people after they witness the arrival of a fleet of ships that he realized meant a flood of fortune seekers to come.

This was followed by reading *Encounter* (Yolan, 1991), a story told through the eyes of a Taino Indian boy. This story was particularly interesting to these Puerto Rican students, whose ancestors included Taino Indians. This simple story is extremely rich for visual interpretation, making it a treasure for deaf students. One illustration shows the rich golden color of the Taino child's hand pinching the pale, almost jaundiced looking hand of one of Columbus' men, saying, "The hand felt like flesh and blood, but the skin was moon to my sun." In another passage, "I watched how the sky strangers touched our golden nose rings and our golden armbands... I watched their chief smile. It was the serpent's smile...." This passage is illustrated by a dark picture of an avaricious Columbus, gazing at a piece of gold Taino jewelry.

Students were further motivated by the discovery of two errors—one linguistic and one historical in this book. In a description of the sound (chinga-chunga) that the bells, given as gifts to the Tainos, made, the students were quick to point out that the onomatopoeic word was actually an obscenity in Spanish. Additionally, the book implied that the Tainos had no weapons which led us to do some research. We found in fact they had had bows and arrows, hatchets, and clubs (Alegria, 1970).

Studying the situation of the Jews in Spain, using *The Other 1492* (Finkelstein, 1989) led us to the realization that if the Jewish presence in Spain endured for fifteen centuries and the Arab/Moslem rule had lasted for eight centuries (beginning in 711), why did history imply that the Spaniards were "white"? Instead, we came to the conclusion that the Spanish conquistadors were most likely of African, Sephardic, "Spanish," and other origins. The notion of "La Raza" became more complex as we realized Spaniards were themselves a combination of many peoples.

Activities from *Rethinking Columbus* we used included "Alphabet of Things that the Americas Gave to the World" (p. 31), and *The Untold Story* (pp. 32-33) written by a high school student. The alphabet not only was a rich source of vocabulary, but history as well. The *Untold Story*, which summarized the destruction of the Taino people and culture, provided an example of student writing. The curriculum suggests using it as a model text, though my students read it to help with their videotape. Excerpts of Columbus' diary included in the curriculum ("For the love of gold") introduced the students to primary source material, as well as reinforcing the story read in *Encounter* which described the "explorers" (or conquerors/invaders) greed for gold.

Growing Vegetable Soup

My other class, a group of four fifth grade students with very limited literacy skills in both Spanish and English, had all entered the school in that school year. I was limited to working with them two to three periods of 45 minutes each a week. In order to coordinate with the upcoming Science Fair, I decided on a unit *Growing Vegetable Soup*, based on the book by Lois Ehlert.

My choice of a unit on growing vegetables was inspired by a friend and colleague who works with many immigrant deaf students in New

York. She told me that newly arrived students spent a lot of time in the school's greenhouse. Many of them were from rural areas and working with growing things was a comfortable way to start learning ASL and English. I was also aware that my students often did not know the names of the foods they see in the US, and often they did not even know the names of fruits and vegetables—in Spanish, English, or ASL—common in the cooking at home.

Lois Ehlert's books (she has another on Fruits) using paper collages for illustrations, are ideal for ESL classes. For this particular unit, I had a copy of the *Big Book* (18 inches by 27 inches), as well as student copies. Activities included work with verbs (the story includes a good selection that are well supported by the illustrations), doze sentences, and writing a shopping list from the recipe given at the end of the book. We made a trip to the local food coop (across the street) for ingredients. Each student was responsible for certain things on the list, including getting the right amount. Using the recipe in the story, they prepared and cooked the soup.

Ehlert's books are like storybook dictionaries as she labels the illustrations with key vocabulary. For example, nouns illustrated and labeled in our story included tools—rake, shovel, hoe; seed package, garden glove, soil, hole; vegetables—corn, carrot, tomato, pea, pepper, green bean, cabbage, broccoli, onion, potato, and zucchini squash; and many others.

Additionally, the students had a windowsill garden, which they transplanted and used for their group science project. They made charts to illustrate their science project—using vocabulary, especially verbs that they had learned through reading the story (plant, give, wait, grow, watch, pick, dig, carry, wash, cut, put, cook, eat). The project was a winner and the students not only took home ribbons from the science teacher, but plants to care for at home.

Critical Comments and Recommendations

The need for changes in deaf education are apparent not only for the immigrant deaf and hard of hearing children I described, but for all deaf students. Despite more than a century and a half of American deaf education, educators are still not doing a very good job. Increased

recognition of the potential of a bilingual/bicultural model in deaf education is a beginning. However, we are at tremendous risk of excluding growing numbers of immigrant deaf and hard of hearing children, and those from linguistically diverse families. If we limit the reform of deaf education to issues of language of instruction—the use of ASL—little will change for growing numbers of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse deaf students (Gerner de Garcia, 1990; 1992).

Perhaps a crucial point must be resolved here. In the United States of today should any educator be advocating bicultural education? We live in a multicultural society, and the Deaf Community is more multicultural than the general population. In the 1992-1993 Annual Survey of Deaf Children and Youth, over 40% of the school age population was non-White. However, in deaf education, multicultural education has barely been addressed. This may be partly due to the reluctance of a society to accept children and adults who are deaf as members of a cultural and linguistic minority. A society that cannot accept the Deaf as bilingual and bicultural is unlikely to be ready to view the actual multicultural nature of the community (Humphries, 1993). Furthermore, as the Deaf Community battles for recognition as bilingual and bicultural, many in the community seem to view multiculturalism as another battle that may divert attention from their own struggle. However, the truth may be that ignoring the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Deaf Community negatively impacts multicultural members of the Deaf Community, particularly immigrant deaf students.

A second vital issue is training in ESL and Bilingual methods and pedagogy. Despite numerous reforms in the past few years, preservice teacher training programs often fail to adequately prepare students for the reality of working with multicultural deaf populations. As teacher training is redesigned to respond to culturally and linguistically diverse learners, the program requirements may become unwieldy with more add-ons and not enough revamping of existing courses. Schools and colleges of education are limited by the expertise and experience of their faculty, who typically do not have extensive training in second language acquisition, bilingual education, ESL methodology or multicultural education.

Additionally, there is a critical need for retraining of teachers and other professionals already working in the field. This retraining should not be thought of as the typical two hour or half day inservice workshop. This retraining should be extensive and intensive, and for that reason should be called retraining rather than inservice education. What is called for in the education of deaf children and particularly deaf immigrant children, is a new perspective, a new framework, and a new paradigm.

In order to address the needs of deaf children from racially, ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse homes, including immigrant children, schools and programs for the deaf should:

- Recognize and validate the languages of the students, including home language, and foreign sign languages.
- Provide support through specialized programs for incoming immigrant students to enable them to bridge the cultures and languages they live with, while addressing the needs of those deaf children who are learning ASL and may or may not know another Sign Language.
- View all deaf children as coming to school with something, rather than viewing them as having "no language".
- Provide ESL instruction for recently arrived immigrant students, distinct from the type of ESL instruction which their U.S. born deaf peers may receive.
- Provide for naturalistic assessment of deaf children, in and out of school, especially multicultural deaf children. Assessments in school should include the participation of Deaf adults who share the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children. Out of school assessments should include a home visit to observe the child with the family.
- Provide multicultural deaf children with diverse staff, including hearing and Deaf adults from their own communities.
- Provide school-based programs for deaf children that address their linguistic and cultural heritage. Reinforce knowledge of the home language for those children who have a base. Teach some of the home language to those children who have little or no knowledge of their family's language.
- Provide training/retraining for school staff on issues including: bilingual theory, bilingual methodologies, methods of teaching ESL, and multicultural issues in deafness.

Furthermore, as previously stated, preservice programs must address the needs of an increasingly multicultural student body in deaf education by:

- Retraining faculty with an emphasis on multicultural, bilingual, and ESL theory.
- Develop training for preparing specialists/practitioners in ESL education for deaf education.
- Infuse ESL/bilingual/multicultural methods and pedagogy in teacher preparation programs.

Conclusion

The application of ESL methodologies and bilingual pedagogy is not widespread in the education of deaf students. There is at least one category of deaf students for which this may be legally mandated—students who are "national origin-minority" students with limited English proficiency (Lyons, n.d.). Laws including the Civil Rights Act (1964), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title VI, and legal decisions such as the Lau Remedies (1974) require the provision of ESL services for LEP students. Schools and programs for the deaf may be compelled to move forward with ESL for such students in order to comply with existing laws. However, as noted in the recommendations, provision of appropriate training, particularly in ESL theories and methods, must become an absolute priority. If not, teachers will continue to be inadequately prepared to provide bilingual and/or multilingual education for deaf students—immigrant and non-immigrant alike.

Author's note:

I wish to thank the Massachusetts Association for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language for a Classroom Research Grant awarded Spring 1992 which enabled me to develop the ESL applications for Hispanic immigrant and Spanish-dominant deaf and hard of hearing children described in this article.

References

- Alegria, R. E. (1970). *History of the Indians of Puerto Rico*. San Juan, PR: Colección de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

- Benedict, S., & Carlisle, L. (1992). *Beyond words: Picture books for older readers and writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman
- Cohen, O. (1987, March). *Current and future needs of minority hearing impaired children and youth*. Testimony before the Commission on Education of the Deaf, Washington, DC.
- Crawford, L. W. (1993). *Language and literacy learning in multicultural classrooms*. Boston : Allyn and Bacon.
- Ehlert, L. (1987). *Growing vegetable soup*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ Big Books).
- Finkelstein, N. H. (1989). *The other 1492: Jewish settlement in the New World*. New York : Beechtree.
- Foreman, M. (1991) *The boy who sailed with Columbus*. New York Arcade.
- Gerner de García, B. A. (1990, April). *Multilingual education for Hispanic deaf children*. Paper presented at International Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, San Francisco, CA.
- Gerner de García, B. A. (1992). Diversity in deaf education: What can we learn from bilingual and ESL education? In D. S. Martin & R. T. Mobley (Eds.) *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Teacher Education in Deafness* (pp. 126-139). Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University.
- Humphries, T. (1993). Deaf culture and cultures. In K. M. Christensen & G. L. Delgado (Eds.) *Multicultural issues in deafness* (pp. 1-15). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Johnson, R., Liddell, S., & Erting, C. (1989). *Unlocking the curriculum: Principles for achieving access in deaf education*. Unpublished paper. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet Research Institute.
- Lowry, L. (1990). *¿Quién cuentan las estrellas ?* [Number the stars]. Madrid : Espasa-Calpe.

- Lyons, J. J. (n.d.). *Legal responsibilities of education agencies serving national origin language minority students*. Chevy Chase, MD: Mid-Atlantic Equity Center.
- Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. White Plains, NY : Longman.
- Peregoy, S. F., & Boyle, O. F. (1993). *Reading, writing and learning in ESL*. White Plains, NY : Longman.
- Perspectives in education and deafness: Whole Language - A folio of articles*. (1991). Washington, DC : Precollege Programs Outreach Services.
- Rethinking Columbus: Teaching about the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in America*. (1991). Milwaukee, WI Rethinking Schools.
- Ruiz, R. (1990). Official languages and language planning. In K. Adams & D. Brink (Eds.). *Perspectives on official English*. Berlin Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ruiz, R., & Nover, S. (1992). ASL and language planning in deaf education. In D. S. Martin & R. T. Mobley (Eds.) *Proceedings of the First International symposium on Teacher Education in Deafness* (pp. 153-171). Washington, DC: Gallaudet University.
- Schildroth, A. N., & Hotto, S. A. (1994). Inclusion or exclusion: Deaf students and the inclusion movement. 139, 239-243. *American Annals of the Deaf*.
- Yolan, J. (1992). *Encounter*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.